



The Frontline Supervisor

*Helping You Manage Your Company's
Most Valuable Resource - Employees*

June 2001

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- ◆ My employee writes memos or makes statements referencing his “legal advisor” when I correct his performance. These memos make me angry and admittedly they are intimidating. How should I respond?

Although you should be concerned and thoughtful when managing the performance of any employee, the organization’s needs still must be met. Be sure to follow your organization’s policies, procedures, and work rules consistently. Keep your supervisor, and appropriate human resource or other management representatives, abreast of your interactions. They can help you feel less intimidated so you can focus on productivity. Since you are troubled by this conduct, meet with the EAP to discuss your supervision style to ensure that you are not provoking your employee in some way. The EAP can offer guidance on personal communication and supervision practices. An attempt to intimidate management by referring to legal advisors is inappropriate, so this could become a separate conduct issue if it continues.

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- ◆ For years, my employee has rejected my accounts of her performance problems. She dismisses my documentation as not factual. Discussions typically include convincing her that past discussions have actually occurred. What can I do?

It is not uncommon for employees to deny that discussions about performance took place, particularly if long periods of time have passed since their occurrence. Although your documentation may be accurate, but disputed, you may need to use it anyway to support any adverse action you propose. Obviously you are frustrated at not getting agreement from your employee that the performance pattern exists. You may never be successful at this task, but establishing a reciprocating documentation plan can help. Give your employee a copy of your documentation or a corrective letter and invite her to respond in writing, agreeing to it, or rejecting it with her own written account. This slowly builds a more effective record of your attempts to correct performance and ends the verbal “confront-deny” pattern. You may get the performance changes you seek because the argumentative behavior no longer controls the supervision relationship.

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- ◆ My employee is obese and for years has fallen asleep at meetings. He says he’s just concentrating, but I bet he has sleep apnea. I’ve been patient because I had it myself, and I don’t want to embarrass him. Can I refer him to the EAP?

If your employee appears to be falling asleep at meetings, document this as the performance issue to justify a supervisor referral. Although you had sleep apnea yourself, and your employee may have it too, you do not know this for sure. His condition could be related to many other health conditions, including a drug problem. Be careful about unwittingly participating in “armchair diagnosis,” which includes subjectively ruling in or ruling out a medical reason for performance problems. Sympathy and your own experience with sleep apnea have led you to postpone an EAP referral that might have led to effective help for his condition. You will avoid embarrassing your employee and make it easier to refer him by not discussing his medical condition or his obesity. Focus only on the sleep problem.

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- ◆ My employee has severe absenteeism problems that have affected morale. He has good skills, but his coworkers are complaining. I feel a lot of pressure to terminate him. I fear using the EAP because this might delay his departure.

Absenteeism problems are highly amenable to EAP intervention, particularly when you see evidence of your employee's skills and abilities. For this reason alone, you should consider using the EAP. Experience shows that the employee and your organization will be better off if you make the referral. You would be feeling less pressure now if you had referred earlier when the attendance problems first emerged, but do not allow this misstep to dissuade you from referral now. You will probably see improvement in his attendance pattern the moment you make the supervisor referral. This is a natural response, but it won't last without follow-through with the EAP's recommendations. Act to support your employee when the pattern stops, or follow through with your next step when or if the attendance pattern recurs.

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- ◆ My employees are frequently irate and nearly rebellious at the outcome of their performance evaluations each year. I dread this annual duty of mine and, as a result, I skip it periodically. How can I minimize their reaction?

Unfortunately, the simple answer of "grade as fairly as possible," is not a guarantee that employees will accept their performance evaluations. Employees who work very closely with each other are more likely to be upset over performance evaluations when they are dissimilar. They believe they have an accurate perception of their own work quality and that of their peers. Frequent communication with the supervisor is essential so that annual evaluations are less of a surprise or shock. Consider meeting briefly and privately with each of your employees four times a year (including the annual performance review). Be specific. Ask the employee for a self-evaluation. Then provide your feedback and judgment of his or her work. Justify your ratings if you disagree. This process improves your relationship with each employee and reduces conflict at the final evaluation.

Notes:

This information is intended only for the employees of your company. Please do not post it on a website that is accessible by the general public or by your company's clients.

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